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Gun runner: CIA armed contras despite ban

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WASHINGTON — CIA operatives used unmarked helicopters to deliver explosives and other supplies to contra rebel units inside Nicaragua last year despite a congressional ban on U.S. military aid, according to a man who participated in the supply network.

The secret system using helicopters was one of three weapons-supply schemes described by Iain Crawford and other workers in the secret contra supply network. The other two systems involved airdrops from an unmarked DC-6 cargo plane painted flat black and based at a remote airstrip in southern Honduras, and a coastal resupply system using three high-speed, 27-foot "stealth boats" to deliver both arms and saboteurs deep inside Nicaragua.

CIA participation in the helicopter operation would constitute further evidence that U.S. government personnel participated in the supposedly private network that aided the contras in 1985 and 1986. At the time, the United States was barred by Congress from giving the Nicaraguan rebels direct or indirect military aid.

Crew members have previously said they were assisted by U.S. military officers and CIA operatives in planning weapons drops to the contras. Crawford has said that he personally briefed former National Security Council aide Oliver L. North about a major weapons delivery last April, three days before North attended meetings with President Reagan on Central America.

CIA spokeswoman Sharon Foster said yesterday that the agency could not confirm or deny activities in Central America. She said, however, that the CIA "had not provided supplies or arms to the contras" in any way that violated congressional restrictions.

According to Crawford, 30, of Fayetteville, N.C., helicopters delivered supplies to contra camps three or four times weekly between April and June from a base camp at Aguacate in southern Honduras. At the time, he was employed as a parachute rigger in a separate arms airdrop system that was exposed Oct. 5, when a C-123 cargo plane was shot down in.

Crawford's operation drew supplies from the same base camp and used the same U.S.-improved Honduran airstrip as the CIA-controlled supply helicopters and the DC-6 airdrops, according to Crawford and a co-worker who asked not to be identified.

On one occasion, Crawford said, he hitched a ride aboard a UH-1H helicopter that delivered 250 pounds of plastique (plastic explosives) to a contra encampment on a sandbar on the Nicaraguan side of the Rio Coco, which divides Nicaragua from Honduras.

"I don't know where it was manufactured," Crawford said of the explosives, carried in clearly marked wooden boxes from the contra supply depot at Aguacate. "It was not U.S. military but it was plastique."

Contra ground crews swarmed to unload the helicopter when it alighted on the sandbar and it took off immediately afterward, Crawford said.

Crawford and his co-worker said that they were aided by two men identified to them as CIA operatives.

Crawford said he was granted permission to board the helicopter by a man nicknamed "Mick," who had been identified to Crawford as a CIA operative. Crawford's co-worker also identified "Mick" as a CIA operative involved in the resupply effort. The co-worker said a second man, nicknamed "Moe," was also a CIA operative at Aguacate, where, he said, both CIA men advised contra leaders and operated a sophisticated satellite-linked communications system.

Crawford said he was told by Mick that CIA helicopter crews, which normally refueled at Aguacate, operated out of the Palmerola air base, a major base for U.S. Army personnel about 30 miles northwest of Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras.

After the CIA helicopter crews flew their missions into Nicaragua, "they went back to their hotels in Tegucigalpa," Crawford said he was told.

Crawford said he did not know if there were any U.S. government connections to the supply runs of the DC-6 or the stealth boats.

Pilots for the aging DC-6 based at Aguacate typically arrived at dusk aboard a twin-engine Beechcraft airplane, according to Crawford and his co-worker. Contra parachute riggers whom Crawford knew to be CIA-trained would load the DC-6 before the pilots arrived and serve as loadmasters on middle-of-the-night cargo drops. Before dawn, the pilots departed Aguacate.

According to Crawford and his co-worker, the CIA conveyed the DC-6 to the contras last year. While the plane could not be identified clearly enough to trace its ownership, elements of the meager contra air force consist of planes declared surplus by the Defense Department, then transferred to the CIA at nominal cost and lent to the contras.

The Pentagon acknowledged the practice in 1985. Congress criticized it in 1986 debates on contra aid because such "loans" were not counted against spending restrictions.

A third resupply system used three experimental stealth boats made of Kevlar, a DuPont composite as strong as fiberglass but only half as heavy. Powered by Evinrude 235 outboards, the boats reach speeds in excess of 60 m.p.h. and are virtually invisible to radar, according to Karl Phaler, president of Freedom Marine of San Diego.

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Freedom Marine sold three of the boats, for about $125,000, to the World Anti-Communist League (WACL) of Phoenix, Ariz., in December 1985, said Phaler, 47, a former Navy commando and a contributor to Soldier of Fortune magazine.

Robert K. Brown, the magazine's publisher and an influential contra supporter and trainer, had invested $500,000 in Freedom Marine and was his principal investor, Phaler said. Brown confirmed the investment.

Both Phaler and Brown denied any knowledge of the boats' use after their hulls were reinforced for machine gun mounts and sold to the WACL, whose founder and U.S. affiliate president, retired Army Gen. John Singlaub, is an influential contra fund-raiser. WACL spokesman Joyce Downey said in an initial telephone interview that she believed the boats were used for medical evacuations.

Asked for further details, she provided none, despite repeated telephone calls.

According to three U.S. experts in small boat military tactics, who asked not to be identified because it would hurt them professionally, the stealth boats saw little medical service.

Instead, from coastal bases in Honduras and Costa Rica near the Nicaraguan border, the boats, painted gray, were used, as one U.S. expert put it, to "beat up on the bad guys and deliver supplies." Initially, they were intended only to carry supplies, said a second source who has spoken to participants, "but it would be foolish to say they weren't used operationally."

Nicaraguan officials long have said that U.S.-supplied small craft have carried saboteurs on attacks against oil depots, bridges and other civil works. The small craft were said to have been launched from offshore mother ships in operations sometimes supported by helicopters.

How often stealth boats were used in recent operations could not be determined. A Honduran military official confiscated at least one, sources said.

Maintenance and engine problems frequently idled the DC-6, according to Crawford and his co-worker, as did tangled parachutes. Eventually, Crawford's operation took over most of the airdrops, he said.

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